

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 24

APRIL 10th, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

A question that will "bear a lot of thinking on" is raised in a letter from one of our members. After expressing his appreciation of the News-Letter he goes on to say:

"Let me first say what it is more than anything else that dashes my hopes of the effectiveness of this effort and tends to damp down any rising enthusiasm. I doubt its having any lasting effect, because I am compelled to doubt the effectiveness of *any* appeal to reason in this present age. Something has happened either to the minds of men or to the thoughts which fill them. These have grown somehow *thinner*. There is no faith in ideas and in their compelling power comparable to that which ruled in the nineteenth century. Whether there is simply too much newsprint about, or systematic propaganda has poisoned the wells, or whatever the cause may be, the average man of to-day has lost faith in ideas. When he has followed some chain of thought to its logical conclusion and given his assent, he will turn to another page of his newspaper and read, without dissent, the exact opposite. The mind of the German nation as it listens to Goebbels and Ribbentrop, first before and then after the Russo-German Pact, is only an extreme instance of this. It is not the startling exception we should like to think it."

I limit myself this week to stating the problem. I shall return to it later and let you have more of the letter from which I have quoted. If you have anything to say about it please let me hear from you.

VOICES OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

The March issue of *Christendom* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford. 2s.) contains two instructive articles showing the direction in which some of the minds in the younger generation are tending. Both betray a despair of existing society, though not of life.

In the first, the writer dismisses as unpromising any attempt to influence *public* events towards a more Christian instead of a more pagan society. He denies, however, that his disbelief in such an attempt necessarily implies anarchism or concentration on a purely spiritual mission or a retreat into pietism. It may mean devotion to the creative task of growing something new. The purpose is to change society in spite of the politicians. Those for whom the activities of the state have come to seem alien and meaningless have no choice but to turn to growing potatoes and onions or conducting experimental schools outside the educational system or to betake themselves to such reactionary things as having wives and children or even going to church. They are disposed to reverse the drift in the wrong direction by personal and corporate action in local affairs and by example, rather than by direct intervention in party politics. They want to demonstrate that to keep rabbits and grow Brussels sprouts and keep window-

boxes belong to a mode of life different from that of those who spend all their time at the pictures or dog-racing or football matches.

The writer of the second paper admits that Christians did at one time suppose that socialism or liberalism were a means of bringing nearer social reforms demanded by their religion, and that the League of Nations was a sort of secular counterpart of the Communion of Saints, but he is convinced that "to-day no Christian of integrity and discernment believes in any of these things." He believes that the true wisdom for to-day is found in the saying that when the fish have gone far out to sea we had best take to mending our nets against the return of the next tide. This involves in present circumstances a necessary limitation of the scope of Christian influence and a concentration on the basic realities of life, such as our homes, our land, our immediate associates. It is not to disown the responsibilities of citizenship, but to discharge them in spheres in which citizenship means something. The true meaning of politics can be rediscovered only in a community small enough to allow a sense of real civic responsibility to everyone.

We are far more likely, he holds, to exert an influence on the nation's life by dealing with it in detail—by splitting up the problem—than by attempting a large and general control of nation-wide movements. But even if the opportunity for large-scale influence were offered, the Church would have to reject it as a snare and temptation. Social disease has gone so deep that the immediate task is to promote healthy living in those basic spheres of life which are essentially independent of State control.

A PARTIAL TRUTH

In the first letter of this year (C.N.-L. No. 10) I urged that if we want a Christian society we must distinguish at least five great tasks, all of them immense and all of them indispensable. What the writers I have quoted insist on with force and persuasiveness is the importance of two of these. But what of the others?

The positive demand made in these papers is essential to the recovery of a more Christian order of society. The disease of civilisation is radical. We have come under the tyranny of a false scale of values. It is a true insight which recognises that in these conditions the real values of life cannot be regained by merely talking about religion, but only by living it, and in particular by a return to the simplicities of life in contact with nature and in direct relations with other persons. It is as true of spiritual as of military warfare that it cannot be waged successfully with untrained and undisciplined troops. Those who have gained through contact with fundamental realities a new strength of soul will be in the days to come the seed-plots of a new social order.

It is also an important truth that democracy is alive and real only where there is a widespread diffusion of initiative and responsibility; and that a Christian order of society, in which men act as responsible persons, will find room for a multiplicity of groups pursuing in freedom their own social, cultural and professional ends.

But, true as all this is, I cannot help suspecting that the writers unconsciously assume the continuance of the conditions created by the liberalism which they disparage. Where in the Nazi or Communist systems shall we find the "basic spheres of life essentially independent of State control," within the happy shelter of which the process of religious and social regeneration is to take place? What will be the fate of the proposed programme if the battle for freedom is lost in the national life as a whole?

With the view that what is advocated is an essential part of the total task and

that some have a vocation to serve God in this particular way we can cordially agree. But to those who would push the argument beyond this positive demand and maintain that we can stand aside and allow public events to take their course, three questions must be put.

First, what about the large majority of Christians who are not so fortunate as to be able to keep rabbits or grow potatoes or serve on Parish Councils, but have to earn their living amid the hustle and pressure of industrial life? I have on my desk a letter from one of our members in which he raises this very problem.

"I am compelled to ask," he writes, "whether the alternative to the present organisation of society is to be found in separate communities. These live a life within their own terrain. Probably they have their problems of which we are not aware, but do they have the everyday worries which the ordinary Christian has? To be a spoilsport because you do not join in the staff raffle; to lose promotion because you won't go out drinking with the manager; to lack popularity because your conversation is comparatively clean—little things, these everyday worries, but they and their like are the struggles of the ordinary man."

Secondly, what about the changes which are taking place in our society with extraordinary rapidity? If things are allowed to drift we may wake up to find ourselves in the inexorable grasp of a totalitarian system. How can this disaster be averted if Christians refuse to exert themselves? Before we commit ourselves either in theory or practice to the view that in the main fields of human activity and struggle Satanic forces are omnipotent and cannot be fought, we must do some hard thinking. Are we not in danger of surrendering belief in the first article of the Apostles' Creed? A policy of retreat may mean one of two quite different things. It may be a flight from total, spiritual war or a renewed dedication to its prosecution. Everything hinges on the difference.

Thirdly, is this cultivation of soil and soul the only proper sphere for the Christian or has he also a part to play in the hurly-burly of existence? Is it the duty of Christians to contract out of the "high tumultuous lists of life"? I read the articles on which I have commented while I was in the middle of Douglas Reed's *Nemesis*? (Jonathan Cape, 10s. 6d.). It is a biography of Otto Strasser, Hitler's implacable foe and, his biographer believes, potential successor. It is a book to be read by all who would understand the forces by which history is made. Must Christians remain aloof from these conflicts? A party of gangsters is no place for a Christian; but is the defeat and restraint of gangsters no part of his concern? May the coming into existence of a Christian society demand among other contributions the qualities and deeds of the soldier and the knight? Perhaps between the ideas with which the discussion began and that which we have reached at the end there may be not only an opposition but a connection. Some who in the days to come will contend most valiantly in the heat of the battle may be the sons of those who in retreat have re-won their souls.

Yours sincerely,

D. H. De Laan

Subscriptions. — The rate of subscriptions to the News-Letter is 10s. (\$3 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year, and 5s. 6d. (\$1.50 in U.S.A. and Canada) for six months, and 3s. for three months.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The following is reproduced, by permission of the editor, from an article in the April number of *Religion in Education* (S.C.M. Press, 1s.) by the headmaster of an evacuated school:

Evacuation has been a glorious opportunity for real education and, above all, for real religious education. Schools that have been moved to smaller towns can become an organic part of the community, and can help to make the towns themselves into a more organic community.

In this particular school the boys had been mentally and spiritually prepared to face the problems of evacuation, and we had had active discussions on how we should deal with ourselves in the reception area. Consequently, immediately on our arrival we set about discovering how we could be of use to the community. We approached local organisations—the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, the A.R.P. Officer, the Council—and made friendly contacts with local newspapers and shops, so that we could advertise our purpose either by advertisement or by putting in the shop windows posters of the boys' own designing. The boys have for five months done a great deal of A.R.P. work; they have done newspaper rounds and milk rounds (the tradesmen concerned are very alarmed lest we should migrate to a camp and leave them in a very awkward predicament!); they have taken it on themselves to keep the streets and the common clear of litter; the Scouts have so successfully undertaken the collection of wastepaper that they can dispose of nearly a ton a week; they have gained all sorts of practical experience, working with the wireless experts or the garages, acting as accountants' and solicitors' clerks. They have had the luck to put some of our agricultural ideas into effect, and they have now undertaken the cultivation of a large allotment of their own, and also of a three-acre field for growing potatoes.

The community has met this initiative with answering generosity. Housewives have lent their drawing-rooms for groups of boys who wish to rehearse plays, to have gramophone recitals or run debates, or to organise discussion groups. One farmer has offered technical assistance to help cultivate the field; another has a gang of boys sawing and chopping wood and helping to clear an eight-acre field for

ploughing. A committee of householders has been instituted to help with any problems that arise locally and to give advice on general matters. Numerous clubs have been organised either by friends of the school acting on their own initiative, or with the co-operation of the elder boys, and the clubs are developing from mere playrooms into something more creative and useful. Plays have been produced and concerts organised by local producers and with the help of local musicians in filling the depleted school orchestra. The choirs of two of the local churches are largely staffed by the school, and at Christmas the school sang and read the Nine Lesson and Carol Service in both of them. At Christmas, also, the committee which organised parties and entertainments for the whole area had as its chairman a member of the staff. It was a remarkable tribute to his energy and tact that the representatives of all local organisations should work under the lead of a comparative stranger.

All this work is in the deepest sense "religious," since any real initiative within an individual is a spiritual activity. Moreover, all these manifold ways of mutual help and encouragement lay the foundation of conscious religion. In addition, many of the boys who at home never enter church or chapel have a very good chance of acquiring the habit of corporate worship, all the more so when they are helped by the active support of the local clergy, who take classes in religious instruction or confirmation. And though in the public schools the chapel may be mere routine or a bore, for a day school suddenly converted into something much nearer to a public school, special services in the school on Sundays may have a real value. Local representatives of religious movements and missionaries on leave from abroad have taken these services, and done much to rouse and inspire some of the boys.

In short, if our aim is to produce healthy bodies, well-trained minds and soundly fostered emotions, together with independence, imagination and initiative, present circumstances give us a magnificent chance. Our great need, politically, morally and, above all, spiritually, is a new sense of personal responsibility. Hitherto we have thought of respect for the individual too negatively. We must make people lead themselves, and find useful, positive, creative ways of doing it.

All communications and subscriptions should be sent to—

THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, 20, BALCOMBE STREET, DORSET SQUARE, LONDON, N.W.1.

PRIL 10th, 1940

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS

If we want a Christian society we must make up our minds about the relation between Christianity and politics. Sir Richard Acland's *Unser Kampf* in the Penguin series offers an occasion for clarifying our ideas on this subject. It provides such an opportunity, first, because it is a plea that the only means of saving the world from destruction is the adoption of a new morality in place of the prevailing one—an appeal to which no Christian mind can be indifferent; secondly, because it directly challenges the Churches regarding their attitude; and thirdly, because it has achieved a circulation of over 75,000 copies and appears to be attracting a good deal of popular attention.

In the writing of this paper I have had the help and advice of several of our collaborators.

We must begin by recognising that there are certain attitudes characteristic of the book which are fundamentally Christian.

THE BIG VIEW.

First, the situation is viewed in a large way. What is happening in the world is no hole-and-corner affair. The foundations of society are being shaken and have to be rebuilt. Consequently it is laid down at the start as a basis of mutual understanding that we should agree to think in really big terms. There is no course of action—even though it be our one and only hope of salvation—against which some plausible objection cannot be brought. We can always find some small-scale argument to block the effect of a large-scale argument. Little minds can easily find convincing reasons for resisting change. The author wants, therefore, to be sure at the start that we are talking about the same situation; that we know beyond question

that it is a big situation and can be dealt with only in a big way.

This large view is characteristic of a genuine religious faith. It is the attitude of those who in the bottom of their souls believe in God. Such men do not want to see the world in blinkers. They know that God is other than man. His ways cannot be measured by the human understanding.

This was the attitude of the Hebrew prophets to the events of history when they won their way to monotheism. They contended that it was Jahweh, the God of Israel, who called enemy nations to power. Isaiah makes Jahweh declare that the pagan Assyrian power was the rod of His anger and staff of His indignation. Do we hold to this first article of the Christian creed, or have we fallen back more than two thousand years and become polytheists? To put the matter concretely, if we believe in one God, who is the Lord of history, we must acknowledge the possibility that atheistic communism may be the instrument of His judgment on the failure of a professedly Christian civilisation to achieve social justice.

LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS.

Secondly, there is in the book a refreshing hopefulness. Its optimism, as we shall see, may be too easy. But those who believe in God must be ready to see in the conflicts and strifes of our time an unmasking of the evils which are destroying society—a judgment on what is false and a mercy which is calling us back to an understanding of the true values of life. If the Christian salvation means anything at all it ought to mean deliverance from fear. If a new world is to be born out of the ruins of the old it will be created by those who are

able to take risks. There is a bond which unites those who, however much they may agree or disagree about a particular policy, are ready for a large venture of faith.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?

Thirdly, the book is significant, if for no other reason, because with obvious sincerity it poses the question what it means in modern society to love our neighbour. The future of Christianity turns on the practical answer which it gives to this question. In modern society we cannot, as in more primitive conditions, fulfil our whole obligation to our neighbour directly as man to man. He has a multitude of needs which can only be met by collective, political action.

We are not fulfilling our obligation to our neighbour so long as the present grossly unequal distribution of wealth, income, social power and social opportunity continues; nor while unemployment destroys men's self-respect and sense of being members of a community and brings about a steady deterioration both in health and in morale; nor while more than half of the youth of the country receive no further education or fostering care from the community after the age of fourteen.

It is only by our acts that we can convince the outside world, and ultimately the people of Germany, that we are fighting for a new and better order. We need a clearer idea of our social purpose than at present, and we must at the same time demonstrate the sincerity of our beliefs by definite moves in the direction in which we intend to go.

IDEAL AND FACT.

If we pass now from agreement to criticism the latter must not be allowed to weaken the force of what has been said already.

The book abounds in judgments of facts relating to very complex situations. With many of these judgments some who share Sir Richard Acland's fundamental attitude would disagree. However excellent our intentions, if we read the facts wrongly we shall find that reality in the end always takes its revenge. This does not mean that

the people who like to call themselves realists are necessarily reading the facts rightly; they are just as likely to be wrong about the total facts as anyone else. It only means that to mistake the facts is to miss our aim.

There are no short cuts to wisdom. To fail to bring this truth home to the people is to deceive them. It is no kindness to suggest that there is an easy or quick solution of our problems.

The book betrays a somewhat naïve faith in the goodness of the common man. The same high hopes were cherished at the time of the French Revolution. It was believed by many ardent spirits that it was only necessary to get rid of kings and aristocrats and the natural goodness of the people would ensure a reign of justice, goodwill and happiness. What has followed ought to have disillusioned us. But once again we have the suggestion that we have only to rid the world of tyrants and capitalists and all will be well. It is the perennial temptation to locate evil in some external foe or oppressor and to forget that its seat is in the heart of man.

The experience of Russia ought to enlighten us. Communism began as a revolt against social injustice. It raised in the most challenging form the question of radical social reconstruction, and thereby awakened high hopes throughout the world. It may yet prove to be a turning-point in human history. But subsequent developments show the folly of believing that any class as such has a superiority in virtue. No class or group is immune from the corrupting influence of power.

The excessive optimism about human nature is especially apparent in the chapter on the international order. If we have a chance in this country of creating for the benefit of mankind as a whole a more Christian order of society, we owe it to a long-established Christian tradition that has left a deep mark on our culture and habits, our laws and standards, and to a training extending over centuries in the art of self-government and the exercise of responsibility. It is purely fanciful to imagine that other peoples who have lacked this experience, training and discipline are likely either to accept our democratic ideas or

if they did, to be able at once to apply them in practice.

COMMUNAL OWNERSHIP

The morality of loving one's neighbour leads, in Sir Richard Acland's view, directly to the common ownership of property.

The present unequal distribution of material wealth, and consequently of social power, is a question which cannot be shirked by those who desire a more Christian order of society. The difficulty of the problem is no excuse for evading it. If we want to achieve social justice and harmony we must be prepared for radical changes.

But we shall not solve the problem by making it appear more simple than it really is. Sir Richard Acland, for example, interprets the present distribution of income as signifying that out of every two hundred people in our country

3 people take £8 6s. 8d. a day.

17 people take £1 9s. 3d. a day.

180 people take £0 5s. 6½d. a day.

Leaving on one side the question of the validity of these estimates, the figures suggest that the question is primarily one of personal expenditure, and viewed from this angle none of us can be content with the low spending capacity of the third group, which comprises nine-tenths of the population. But the fundamental difference is not one of personal expenditure but of social power, of which ability to spend is, of course, in our society a principal instrument. If we are seeking social justice and harmony it must be our objective to lessen the disparities of social power. But there is no short and simple road to this end. It cannot be achieved by legislative fiat. Whatever may be the claims of Communism and Fascism the inequalities of social power in those systems are as great as elsewhere.

If we are to achieve a juster distribution of social power and to liberate social activities from the domination of financial interests without succumbing to the evils of a totalitarian system and the tyranny of officialdom, a religious passion for justice must be united with vigorous, disinterested, creative thought. The end we seek will not

be achieved by any single stroke, but by a fruitful combination of principles and a rich variety of expedients. Are the creative energies of our people exhausted, or is there still a mission for this country to fulfil in history? Are there among us sufficient resources of charity, justice and imagination to find in the revolution through which we must inevitably pass the opportunity of creating a more harmonious and worthier social life?

THE CHURCH AND POLITICS

Finally, the question is raised by this book of the attitude of the Church to a political programme of the kind which it advocates. No real answer can be given to this question until we have made certain distinctions in respect both of the Church and of what we mean by politics.

As regards the Church, we must keep clearly in mind the distinction between what is proper to the Church in its corporate capacity as a society organised for religious worship, preaching and teaching, and what ought to be expected from its members acting in their capacity as citizens or as sharers in the economic activities of the community, and exercising their individual judgment and responsibility in these spheres. Failure to make this vital distinction has been a source of endless confusion.

In the political field it is necessary to distinguish three issues which concern Christians in different ways.

The first is the question of a fundamental social and political philosophy. By this is meant a common tradition and outlook underlying the differences between political parties and binding the nation together. In Great Britain this tradition has been the unreflecting acceptance of certain common values and standards, derived largely from Christian teaching, together with a belief in liberty, a readiness to give and take and a reluctance to push one's own view too far—what Adolf Löwe has called a tendency to "spontaneous conformity."

This underlying political philosophy, which has been the bond of unity in the nation, has been largely unconscious. Because it has been taken for granted we have

failed to realise its basal importance. It has now become a serious question whether these traditional assumptions are strong enough to meet the challenge of the new rival philosophies of nationalism and communism, and still more to stand the new strains resulting from a fundamental change in the position of this country in relation to the rest of the world. The habits which have served us well in the past were formed under the protection of a security which no longer exists.

It is one of the gravest weaknesses in our national life that, in contrast with the totalitarian states, we lack a clear and definite social purpose. It may be a condition of our survival as a nation that we should discover such a purpose and, having found it, should make it the inspiration and driving force of our educational system. The whole of our education has suffered from the fact that through fear of bringing in party politics we have refrained from teaching ultimate beliefs.

With this aspect of politics—i.e., the formulation and propagation of a true social philosophy—both the Church as a teaching body and individual Christians have a direct concern.

Secondly, there is the wide field covered by parliamentary, executive and administrative action. In the whole of this sphere moral issues are involved, but are also for the most part inextricably entangled with technical questions, demanding knowledge of a complex body of facts and a skilled estimate of the probable consequences of a particular course of action. Where judgment depends on expert knowledge, the Church as a corporate society is not competent to pronounce judgment. The demand that the Church as an ecclesiastical body should keep out of politics is a proper

demand, in so far as it means that the clergy, or assemblies mainly guided by the clergy, are not as such competent to dictate policy in political and economic affairs.

But it remains true that the whole mass of legislative, executive and administrative action is imbued from first to last with moral significance. Every decision, even in the fields which seem most technical—often precisely in those fields—has its effect in determining whether society moves in a Christian or in a reverse direction. Hence if the Church, as a corporate society, must in the main keep out of party politics, it is vital that its members should discharge their responsibilities in the light of their Christian faith. In this sense a recall to religion is necessarily a recall to politics.

There is a third issue in the political sphere to which we may not close our eyes in times like these. There may be periods in history when not only individuals but the Church as an institution is confronted with the necessity of making a fundamental choice. Its power to serve men in the days to come may depend on its choosing rightly. A revolution always attacks the religion which is associated with the system which it supersedes. The experience of the Church in Russia is a sufficient illustration. To discover amid the confused struggles of to-day which forces are making for greater justice and a nobler future may be beyond the power of finite minds. But to be blind to the possibility of momentous choice and to the consequences that may follow from it would be a grave default. History has its moments of great decision. An understanding of the signs of the times should drive us to unceasing supplication that God may bestow on the Church the gifts of wise discernment and great courage.

J. H. O.

All communications and subscriptions should be sent to—

THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, 20, BALCOMBE STREET,
DORSET SQUARE, LONDON, N.W.1.